

Testimony in SUPPORT of HB115
Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings
Judiciary Committee
Karen Mejia, Riverdale Councilmember, Ward 5

January 31, 2022

Dear Chairman Clippinger and Members of the Committee:

My name is Karen Mejia and I am proud to represent ward 5 of Riverdale Park on the Riverdale Council. I am here today to share my personal connection with this bill - and to ask my fellow policy makers on the state level: get the job done! It's time to get lawyers to our friends and neighbors suffering in ICE detention! It's time for Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings!

And that's what I want to share with you today. My story. Why legal representation for immigrants facing deportation is close to my heart.

My brother was deported in 2019. Like hundreds of immigrant families, my own family was separated due to the unjust and unfair immigration system here in the United States. My brother Hector, means the world to me. It breaks my heart every day that he was forced to leave his 6 year old daughter, my niece, Eliza without a father to raise her. It's the children that suffer the most.

When he faced deportation, we did everything we could to get him a lawyer. We have to pay out of pocket for a private attorney. The lawyer ended up charging two thousand dollars, just for an intake. A short conversation about three minutes long. If that question was two thousand dollars, just imagine how much the entire case would be. We had no money. We couldn't move forward with a lawyer because we couldn't afford it.

My brother was just as much of a Marylander than any other person. He worked hard, took care of his family, and called Maryland his home. The two of us came here to the United States seeking a better life, fleeing gang violence and threats made towards our family. He didn't deserve to be deported. If we had a lawyer, it could have changed everything.

Now, I am doing everything in my power on the local level - but we need statewide legislators to step up. We have got to work together on the federal, state and local level. We have to fight ICE and provide these protections at every level of government.

In Riverdale Park, we have made sure immigrants are active members of our community in all ways by passing a Trust Act to ensure they don't fear contact with our police. We have passed voter expansion so that each resident in our city can participate and have their voice heard. It is time for Maryland to continue paving the way for what our country should look like. I'm proud to see that Dignity Not Detention has passed. Now we have to make sure that the remaining

Marylanders in detention have lawyers. We need to pass Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings.

I miss my brother every day and I know my niece misses her father. Many children are out there missing their Fathers, Mothers, Uncles, Aunts, Brothers, Sisters and the list goes on. Do not let our children continue being part of this horrible statistic. I will continue doing my part in Riverdale Park and I'm excited to work with every single legislator in the county to get this done.